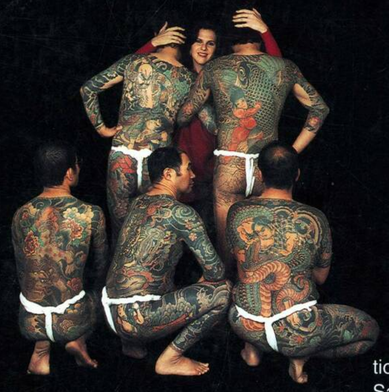
Photography

U.S. $24.95

THE JAPANESE TATTOO

In the fall of 1982, Sandi Fellman, a young American photographer visiting Japan, began the series of color portraits in this striking volume. Her subjects were the *Irezumi*, a secretive group of people drawn from the underworld of Tokyo and Osaka. To meet these men and women who had chosen to have themselves transformed through tattooing into living works of art was difficult; to gain their trust and to persuade them to bare themselves for an American woman and a huge Polaroid camera was an essay in cultural contradiction. But Sandi Fellman's unstinting effort has produced an extraordinary collection of photographs, which at once document a cultural phenomenon virtually unknown in the West (and in Japan as well) and reveal a tradition of artistry and dedication that knows no national boundaries.

We enter through Ms. Fellman's large-format Polaroid prints into a strange and even frightening world where members of the *Yakuza*, the Japanese equivalent of the Mafia, spend hundreds of thousands of yen and hundreds of hours of pain and torment being tattooed. The range of the tattoo images is varied; examples reproduced here are drawn from Japanese mythology, Kabuki theater, and extend to the lexicon of the comic book and biker symbology. The works are executed by well-trained artists, men who have served an exacting apprenticeship with an acknowledged master, and who will eventually inherit his clientele and his working name. Fellman notes in her text the ways in which the tattooer plays "with combinations of belief, fact and fiction, transferring fleeting prayers into mortal permanence, disfiguring so as to adorn, and drawing equally from beauty and the grotesque."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandi Fellman was born and raised in the Midwest and presently lives and works in New York City.
Her photographs, widely published over the past decade and exhibited throughout Europe and the United States, are to be found in numerous private and public collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Center for Creative Photography, and Bibliothèque Nationale.

In addition to her reputation as a fine art photographer, Sandi Fellman has an extensive commercial clientele. Her photographs have been used in many outstanding advertising campaigns and have been reproduced hundreds of times in the pages of magazines and journals. Ms. Fellman also has been commissioned editorially by a wide variety of art and general interest magazines. She is represented by the Jayne H. Baum Gallery.

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FELLMAN

THE JAPANESE TATTOO

ABBEVILLE

THE JAPANESE TATTOO

Photographs and Text
by
SANDI FELLMAN
Introduction
by
D.M. THOMAS



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CONTENTS

8 Introduction
by D. M. Thomas

12 Spirituality and the Flesh:
The Japanese Tattoo

19 The Plates

110 Acknowledgments

110 A Note about the Camera

112 List of Plates

INTRODUCTION

by
D. M. Thomas

Irezumi is a defense, a shield. The tattoo says, If you approach too closely, beware! It is like the Medusa, with snakes in her hair, of Western mythology, and like Keats's snake-woman, the Lamia . . .

> Eyed like a peacock, freckled like a pard,
> Vermilion-spotted, and all crimson-barr'd . . .

The irezumi's skin, which has borne the fiery pain of the needles, becomes cool, reptilian. The images of dragons, jagged lightning flashes, fish scales, and the ripplings of the moving body that a photograph cannot capture, increase the effect of a defensive barrier. Do the irezumi defend themselves against their emotions? Against the technology, consumerism, and conformism of modern Japan? The commuter in his business suit, who is secretly wearing feminine underclothes, may be an irezumi. Secrecy. Separateness. The mirror. Recognition of an artist's work can assume macabre, practical overtones in the case of the Japanese tattoo masters: it can help to identify a murder victim.

Every irezumi—a living painting! Imagine it in the United States. A mangled corpse is dredged up from the Hudson River. "Send for the master." He is taken into the morgue, inspects the poor victim, and says, "Undoubtedly a Chagall." Cops and medics crowd around eagerly as the expert points out the unique qualities of the master. The word spreads: "We brought up a Chagall this morning." Then the Metropolitan Museum becomes interested, bids for it, adds it to the Picasso-prostitute knifed in her room the previous month. . . .

Idea for a Japanese short story. A master looks at the corpse of a young man, once his homosexual lover, and says, "This is a Horiyoshi." He is divided between admiration and jealousy. He does not look at the young man's face.

East meets West in this book. Sandi Fellman's clear and intelligent art makes use of the most advanced photographic technology. Her subjects are people who have chosen to suffer years of torture, and perhaps even shortened their lives, in order to make their bodies look unnatural. East meets West, yet the two do not hold together. They seem to struggle against each other, and shy away. What was happening in the mind of the artist, as she took the photographs, and in the minds of the irezumi who allowed her to do so? Such questions do not occur to me in the case of the more conventional photography; they occur to me here because of the sheer alienness of the subjects. I can no more get inside their painted skin than I can get inside the carp that adorns many of them.

I find—I should add—the Japanese car worker, who writes a suicide note to his boss instead of his wife, equally unknowable.

Zen Buddhism teaches that enlightenment comes from within, not from an external agency. The tattoo becomes a manifestation of the man or woman's inner life. What pictures would modern Europeans or Americans choose as manifestations of their inner reality? Most of us, I suspect, would find it difficult to choose a symbolism capable of expressing our deepest values. The more sensitive would fall back on subjective imagery, such as the depiction of a loved person, but the streets would also be filled with the faces and bodies of fashionable idols—football players and TV personalities. Symbolism, in our culture, is dead.

And how would we suggest, without the aid of dragons, lightning flashes, devils, and skulls, the dark side of our souls? We would probably not dare to; instead, we would safely externalize it. Antinuclear protesters would be marked with mushroom clouds, antivivisectionists with tortured rabbits.

Under the painted skull of Horikin is a mind more alive with signals than all the microcomputers of Sony; and under all of those signals lies the unconscious. Compared with that cosmic design, that tattoo imprinted by living, all his years of art are less than one touch of his needle. Yet—to an extent, at least—he wears his life on his skin, and it would be easy to imagine a psychotherapy based on the analysis of tattoos. It would not be necessary to associate from dreams; the dreams would be visible. Of course, the personality of the tattooist would be a complicating factor—and therefore an enrichment. Jung, with his emphasis on the archetypal, would have found the irezumi marvelous subjects; Freud would have traced the sadism of the tattooist, the masochism of the tattooed, to the Oedipus complex. The art of irezumi, we learn, may have begun with the branding of malefactors. "These men," Freud might have said, "still wish to be punished for their incestuous and parricidal desires. They would prefer to be flayed—but that will come after their death." Maleness, machismo, coupled with the grotesque . . . that seeming contradiction is built into the myth: the same used to be said of white girls in relation to black men. We return to the mixture of seduction and repulsion, in face of perverse. Most of us, from time to time, use sex as a needle to break through the unfeeling skin of routine existence.

Looking at the woman's back in this book, I know that making love to her would be making love to the tattoo more than to the woman. The wives of the male irezumi, Ms. Fellman suggests, experience that erotic displacement. It is not unlike the fetishist's need to interpose a symbol—fur or leather, garter belt or high-heeled shoes—between himself and his naked lover. Both fetishism and irezumi are largely the preserve of men; but also of magical and creative power: for love can be strengthened by the conjunction of a symbol.

Still, it would not surprise me if, for most irezumi, the deepest relationship is with the master, so tirelessly penetrating them.

I, a writer, an improvisor with words, envy and admire these artists who can bring their work, each day, to a point of completion. Not for them the wastepaper basket, piled high with rejected drafts; they cannot rip off the patch of skin and say, "We'll begin again." Each session must produce the equivalent of a perfect haiku, in which the ephemeral and the universal touch. Do the tattoo masters ever experience the despair of Western artists when things will not go right? Or that rending of the spirit described by Yeats: "The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life or of the work"? I suspect they do not. I wish I knew their secret. Sandi Fellman's book does not and could not provide the answer; but it has made me more aware of the question—and of other, equally fascinating, questions—and I am grateful.



th its New York colors and

so ask for *nukibori*, American style tattooing w

shadingless lack of subtlety ("cartoonish" to conservative Japanese eyes). Undoubtedly they have been influenced by the sixty thousand U.S. troops permanently stationed on Army, Air, and Navy bases in Japan, as well as the continual influx and outflow of military personnel who come on leave to Japan for R and R (rest and recuperation) from Korea, Okinawa, Taiwan, and the Philippines, and who take back home tattoo souvenirs of Japan.

For as long as recorded history, tattooing has suffered the unpredictability and trendishness of fashion, running the sometimes reasonable, often capricious gauntlet between sanction and sanctions. As early as 2000 B.C., tattooing was practiced in Egypt, according to evidence found in mummies. Ancient Greeks branded their slaves ***(doulos)*** with a delta, and Romans stamped the foreheads of gladiators, convicted criminals sentenced to the arena, for easy identification. Julius Caesar, when he invaded Britain in 54 B.C., noted with astonishment that the natives not only painted their faces with yellow weld, but wore more lasting decorations that were pricked into their skin.

As for Japan, the earliest chronicle written by Chinese, in A.D. 238–247, describes Japan as the "Queen Country" and recounts along with amounts of tribute how Empress Pimiko asked Silla (Korea) and Wei (China) for help in subduing her rival kingdoms. The Chinese scribes also remarked with some alarm that "the men both great and small tattoo their faces and work designs upon their bodies," a practice that for centuries would be absent from China itself. In Japan's own first historical record, ***Nihongi,*** compiled in A.D. 720, mention is made of an emperor who commutes his cook's death sentence to ostracism by "facial tattoo." It was not until the Edo period of the eighteenth century, a time of social unrest against the warrior caste, when the basis of the economy changed from rice to gold and merchants began surpassing their hierarchal superiors in extravagance, that tattooing began to be in vogue. While commoners were still at the lower end of the social ladder and politically oppressed, they were given freedom to pursue pleasures. Townsmen outdid the samurai in bravado and bravura. Along with the geisha's floating world of flowers and willows, and the arts of literature, puppet theater, Kabuki, and ***ukiyo-e,*** bathhouses and licensed quarters flourished. And so did tattooing. Courtesans tattooed ***kisho bori*** (promise engravings) on hidden parts of their bodies, visible only when naked or in the act of love. The men tattooed themselves more visibly as part of the bluster of being "chivalrous commoners." The variety and prevalence of tattoos is well documented in the popular picture prints of the day by Utamaro, Toyokuni, Kunisada, Sharaku, and Hiroshige, so highly prized by art connoisseurs everywhere.

An event of considerable significance to both Japanese culture and the evolution of the tattoo arts took place in 1805. Bakin, the preeminent novelist of Edo, published his translation of a fourteenth-century Chinese cycle of tales based on historical fact. ***Suikoden*** ("The Water Margin," or, as translated in Sino English by Pearl Buck, "All Men Are Brothers") was written just as the hundred-year-long Mongol dynasty of Yuan (when tattooing was introduced to China) was yielding to the indigenous Ming dynasty. ***Suikoden*** unfolds the heroics of Sung Chiang (whose chest was tattooed with an indigo leopard) and his band of thirty-six major and seventy-two lesser ***hao han*** bravos, or "men to be feared." Seventeen of them sported outrageous tattoos, and although they were good and generous men they had been driven to live outside the law by the wicked injustices of men in power. To serve the common good they retrieved ill-gotten wealth accumulated by officials. To take such treasure, to eat the fruits of misdeeds against the people, to spend a day in such riches meant to them "a smile in the next world." They marauded and swashbuckled, dyed their flags in human blood, and lit their lamps at night with oil squeezed from the fat of their victims' brains. They swore allegiance, took oaths of brotherhood that bound them to go through fire, to step into boiling cauldrons, and to live and die together for



one another. As if inspired by Thucydides they followed the dictum that "the strong do as they will, the weak as they must." Whatever their crimes they still righted wrongs, protected the young, and respected the aged. To beg pardon they bared their tattooed backs to be beaten.

The effect on Japan of ***Suikoden*** was electric. Kabuki adapted some of the stories, and the ***ukiyo-e*** artists illustrated all of them. Kuniyoshi, who had been a failure at his souvenir portraits of favorite actors and scenes of daily life that other artists issued in the tens of thousands (so that the populace could keep up with the latest rages), became an overnight sensation with his series, "108 Heroes of ***Suikoden***." Bakin's book and Kuniyoshi's prints set the fashion for and established the canons of the art of tattoo that have lasted down through to the present.

After the Revolution of 1868, euphemistically known as the Meiji Restoration, the face of Japan changed with the overthrow of the ruling military shoguns and the establishment of the emperor as head of state. The Englishman A. D. Mitford, later Lord Redesdale, one of the earliest chroniclers of this turning point in Japan's history, arrived as a junior official with the nascent embassy in 1866. Moved to describe the turbulence of the times, he attended a public crucifixion, was invited to a ***seppuku*** (harakiri), and watched the ***eijanaika***, a superstitious dance craze that seized the country and was performed daily to celebrate "the end of the world." He also met the last shogun, Tokugawa Keiki, soon to be deposed. Mitford was present when the Emperor Meiji met for the first time with foreigners. "As we entered the Son of Heaven rose and acknowledged our bows. He was a tall youth with bright eyes and clear complexion. His eyebrows were shaved off and painted in high up on the forehead; his cheeks were rouged and his lips painted with red and gold. His teeth were blackened. . . ." To the English this was grotesque, "a travesty of nature."

Japan was acutely sensitive to the opinions and the taste of foreigners. It was only after Japanese ambassadors abroad reported on being taken to the opera as an honor for dignitaries that an emperor of Japan was allowed to attend a Kabuki performance. Until 1887 it had been considered "common," like tattooing. As for tattooing, in 1869 the Japanese were so fearful of appearing barbarous in Western eyes, or rendering the nation contemptible to Americans and Europeans, that tattooing was summarily interdicted. (So was the Buddhist ceremony of cremation.) The police raided the mansions of tattoo masters, seized their paraphernalia, and destroyed their "pattern books." However, the inscrutable Westerners were baffling to the Japanese. They were fascinated by Japan's tattoos, with embassies invariably choosing the most totally tattooed grooms to pull their rickshas. In time the Japanese government relented, and tattoo master Horicho's establishment was permitted to reopen in Yokohama with a sign, "For Foreigners Only." This was where those young sailors George and Nicholas went fresh off their ships.

It is impossible to discuss irezumi without touching on the great classical theater of Kabuki. It has served as Japan's most profound and verisimilar source of the nation's "living history" and teems with dramas where plot devolves on tattoos and ensuant revelations. These include, inevitably, ***Suikoden*** tales, but also many more created originally by Japanese playwrights. Grand Kabuki, on its most recent tour in 1985 at the Metropolitan Opera House and Kennedy Center in Washington, surprised Americans with the starring performances of ***The Scarlet Princess of Edo*** by Takao I and Tamasaburo V. Both the male and female leading roles require tattoos. The hero Gonsuke is a scoundrel, by profession a gravedigger. He is also a thief and an assassin for hire, but, of course, with a heart of gold. On his forearm is a large tattoo of a metallic blue temple bell, a talisman, suspended from a sprig of cherry blossoms. The heroine Sakura, or "Cherry," is a virgin princess with the soul of a whore. In the middle of the night Gonsuke robs her palace, but as he is making his escape he sees the sixteen-year-old sleeping

beauty, the princess, and not wanting to miss an opportunity rapes her. She is unable to see his face, but, "in the pale morning light of dawn's crescent moon," she says, "I caught one glimpse of that arm. Oh! Mark of manhood!"

A year passes, and the princess is about to enter a nunnery. Gonsuke is entertaining Sakura's ladies-in-waiting with a ribald story when he lifts the sleeve of his kimono to emphasize a point. Sakura sees the tattoo, dismisses her retinue, and bids Gonsuke draw near. She pulls up her own sleeve and reveals the identical tattoo on the inside of her arm. She had undergone this pain as proof and pledge of her passion and, according to the power of tattoos as amulets, as magical assurance that she would meet him once again. Indeed, she does. "So, you were the one?" Gonsuke exlaims. "Pierced by love's arrow, within my body both my love and a child grew," she answers in a classically poetic stanza. They resume their love affair but do not live happily ever after. They join society's dregs, and live miserably but lovingly in Japan's lower depths. At the end of the play Gonsuke promises never to abandon her. He does not, but sells her to a house of prostitution so that they may live in comfort.

Since the Meiji period, irezumi with remarkable masterpieces tattooed by famous masters and with particular urges for immortality have willed their highly prized bodies to university laboratories, somewhat in the way Westerners donate organs for medical research or transplanting. More often, however, irezumi who have fallen onto hard times, or who are in urgent need of immediate cash, sell their bodies to institutions staffed by doctors specially trained in decortication. They remove the skin from the fresh cadaver in one piece, preserve it in oils, and mount it, eventually, in airtight frames, so that it can be sold to a museum or private collector. There are probably some three hundred of these half- and full-body tattoos in existence at present. I was given a special tour of the largest collection, one hundred specimens, lodged at Tokyo University's Pathology Department. Nowadays the legalities are considerably more complicated. Beyond the expressed wishes of the deceased, the consent of the entire immediate family must be given and official documents signed and sealed. Occasionally these items come up for auction, and one example of a half-body tattoo a few years ago went for fifty thousand dollars.

Contorting himself in front of mirrors or viewing a friend's snapshots had been the only visual access an irezumi had to the artwork carved into his own back. The almost life-size twenty- by twenty-four-inch instant Polaroid prints reproduced in this book provided a unique opportunity for each irezumi to scrutinize himself in a new way. They began to see themselves fully for the first time and, over a period of years, to reveal to me the depths of their culture, eventually exhibiting not only the beauty and charm but also the sinister, the macabre, and the perverse elements of the Japanese tattoo. The contradictions inherent in the art imbue the photographs with the power to seduce and repel. This is their magic.

THE JAPANESE TATTOO
THE PLATES

RESTRAINT The most ubiquitous of all mythological beasts in Japan is the dragon, which one encounters as ornament or decoration in all aspects of daily life. Symbolically it denotes wealth (the emperor's clothes are called "dragon robes"), and because it lives as easily in water as in air it protects from fire. The dragon is an all-powerful being, a "composite monster" that draws strengths from each of the creatures forming it. It is a serpent that has the horns of a deer, the scales of a carp, the four-clawed talons of an eagle, the nose of a goblin, and, inexplicably, whiskers and a mustache and flamelike appendages at shoulders and hips.

Tattoo master Horikin is best known for his Japanese style full-body tattoos. However, this client asked only for a single dragon, perhaps to celebrate his having been born in the Year of the Dragon, the fifth year of the Oriental Zodiac, or perhaps to "strengthen" his right arm. Moreover, he asked for ***nukibori*** or Western-style tattooing, recently popular in Japan among the young. In nukibori the outline of the pattern is filled in with solid color rather than the more characteristic shading and feathering of Japanese traditional methods.



KINTARO Horikin here turns his attention to Kintaro (Golden Boy), one of the most popular characters in all Japanese folklore and fact, combining a local fertility god with an actual historical figure. Kintaro was a child, a sort of Superboy, whose prodigious feats of strength and perseverance have served as an ideal for a thousand years. Naked and red-complexioned, the child is depicted in art as fighting and subduing a giant carp. The legend of Kintaro is central to the celebration of Boy's Day each year on May 5. Families with sons fly paper streamers or cloth carp on tall poles outside their houses to symbolize their Kintaros within. The carp (*koi*) is King of the River Fish for eating. One ancient Chinese tale tells of how a brave carp leapt a waterfall and became a dragon. The carp when caught awaits the knife without flinching.

During the course of this project, the subject of this photograph became very ill. Horikin suggested to his client that he might one day bequeath his tattooed skin to the university museum. The man seemed willing, but his relatives objected. Because Japanese law prohibits preservation of the skin without approval by the person's family, this photograph will probably be the only document of this work of art.

RED KINTARO Another tattoo master, Horiyoshi II, covered his subject's entire back with the cherubic child Kintaro struggling with the mighty carp. Kintaro wears a blue ***haramaki*** stomach cloth to protect the ***hara***, or belly, which in Japan is considered to be the source of emotions, thoughts, and intentions. It is the navel specifically to which the Thunder God is attracted in infants, soldiers, and the sick, causing ailments. Hence the protective, warming sash.



LION DOG When Empress Jingo in A.D. 200 invaded Korea, the king of Korea swore to defend the Imperial Palace of Japan in perpetuity. The mythical Korean dog (***koma inu***), here tattooed by Horigoro III, as well as the Chinese lion (***kara shishi***), whose statues in stone or porcelain you see outside Japanese shrines, graves, and even private mansions, have become symbolic of guardianship, the protectors of sanctuaries. Their fierceness (yang) is always contrasted with the gorgeous peony flower (yin) for esthetic balance. The skin of the head of the Korean dog was regarded as so tough that it was used for military helmets and considered impervious to arrows. The dog in general is also thought to be a loyal guardian of infants and children.



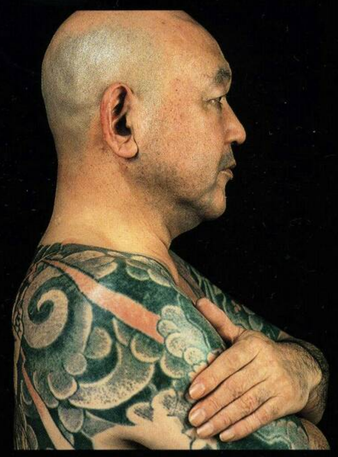
MODESTY One of the oldest tattoo styles still popular today, here executed by Horijin, is called "river" (***kawa***) after the river of clear skin down the chest. Because of its short sleeves and trousers that cut off just below the knees, the entire tattoo can be concealed by wearing a happi coat and mompei trousers. The "river tattoo" or "one-fourth body," as opposed to full-body tattoo, is also convenient for removal (flaying) after death without disturbing the irezumi overall patterns.

The left nipple is a peony while the right becomes the source of a waterfall that the carp climbs, persistently, in order to spawn. The right bicep boasts a horned dragon whose tail ends up in clouds on the left arm. The subject wears a ***fundoshi*** loin cloth, the usual underwear for Japanese men.

SEVEN GODS OF GOOD FORTUNE

The client's protruding abdomen suggested to tattoo master Horiyoshi III a design involving the Seven Deities of Good Fortune, widely worshiped by the merchant class of the seventeenth century, the time of tattoo's greatest fashion, and still popularly revered even today. Hotei, the bald-headed and enormously fat central figure, represents largeness of soul and inner wealth of resources. He was historically an eccentric Zen priest and an incarnation of the messiah of future bliss, the Maitreya or Miroku bodhisattva. The tattoo master has put this god distinguished by his large stomach on the large stomach of his client, so that he seems to be wearing his own self-portrait. Above Hotei in the tattoo is Jurojin, another of the good luck gods, and deity of longevity. This venerable old man always carries a holy staff to which is tied a scroll containing all the wisdom of the world. Wherever he goes he is accompanied by a crane, another symbol of longevity because long after the crane is lost to sight his voice in the sky can still be heard. On the left arm is a rendition of Kabuki makeup indicating a brave and angry commoner insulting samurai superiors and righting wrongs.





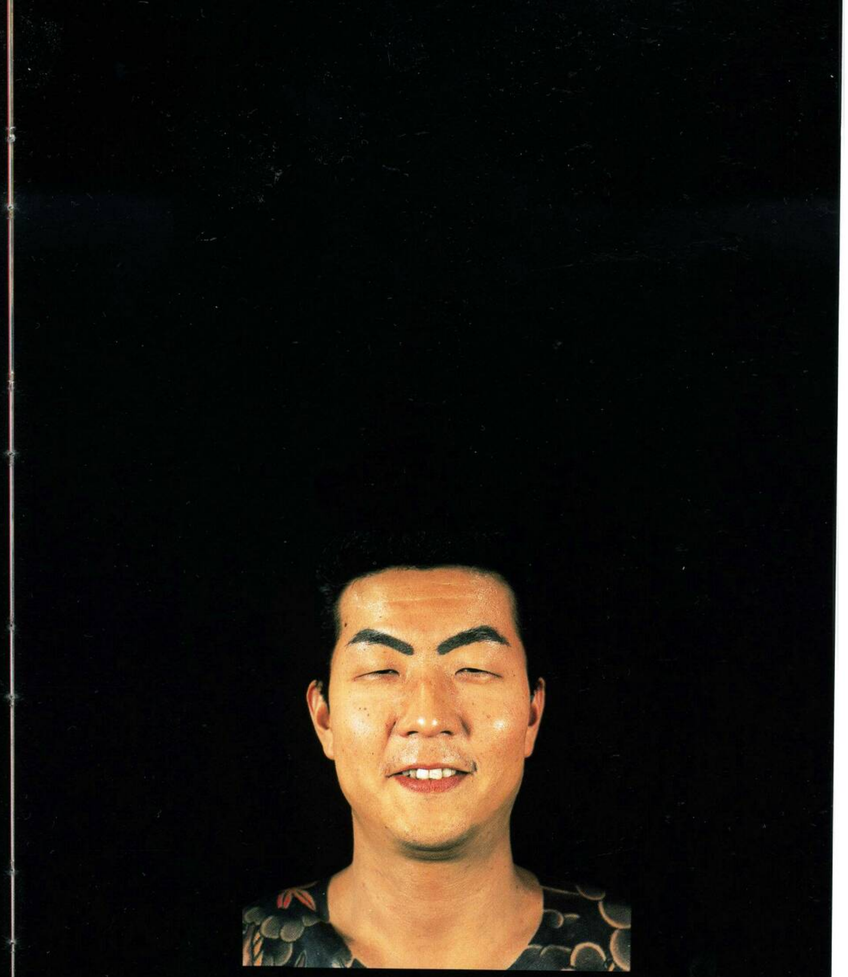
CENTER AND WISDOM This back tattoo is called ***kame***, or tortoise, because it resembles the protective shell on the turtle's back. Again the belly, especially thrust out when posing for this photograph, represents wealth and absence of hardships. Horijin here is the subject and Horishiba the artist tattooer. Horijin started his professional life as a painter but turned to tattooing when he tired of drawing on paper's flat surfaces.

FLIRTATION The legs are enveloped in patterns of peonies, waves, carp, and the elusive, hard-to-catch catfish, done by both Horigoro II and Horigoro III. The model here was one of the first I photographed. He was gentle and kind, often hung about the studio idly, and was always soft-spoken. It was whispered that he had served eight years in prison for having killed someone in a knife fight. It was also said that he had cut off the last digit of his left-hand little finger in atonement for the life he had taken. However, the story was perhaps designed to disguise his membership in the Yakuza, a band who pledge loyalty in blood and frequently forfeit the joint of a finger to prove eternal fidelity.

FIRE AND WATER (overleaf) The two groups of legs were arranged casually but fell naturally into what the master called "a composition of yin and yang," opposites and resolutions, the ebb and flow that produces all change in the observable world. Flames and waves, dragon talons and carp, autumn leaves and clouds, tortoises and gods of luck with their bags stuffed full of worldly blessings.

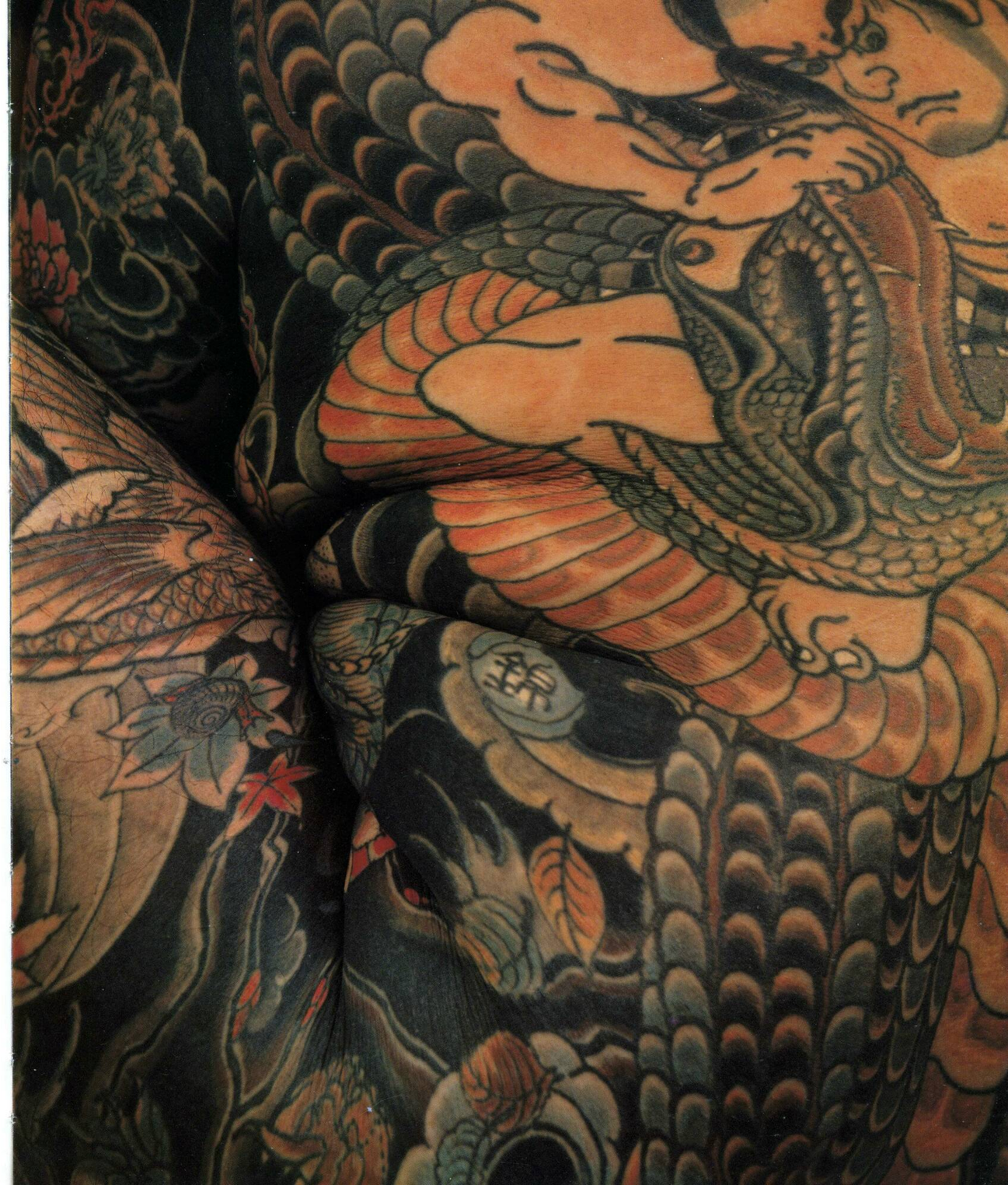






FELICITY The tortoise is a symbol of longevity since it is reputed to live "forever." It also carries with it sexual connotations because its extending and retracting neck resembles an uncircumcised penis. The subject shown here asked Horiyoshi III, somewhat unusually, to tattoo the top of his feet. The master chose the tortoise pattern and on the right foot added the ***kotobuki*** ideogram for "Congratulations" or "Felicity." The client also requested tattooed eyebrows, ostensibly to make his face more fearsome. Cosmetically he doubtless hoped his narrow eyes would appear larger.

HEIKURO AND SERPENT For this tattoo, Horikin turned for inspiration to Heikuro, one of the 108 tattooed heroes of the picaresque Chinese novel ***Suikoden***. It was translated by Bakin in 1805 and glorified in the 1850s by ***ukiyo-e*** artists Utagawa, Kuniyoshi, Toyokuni, and Kunisada. Here Heikuro's battle to the death with a serpent is depicted so graphically that one feels the writhing serpent's power and Heikuro's valor with each movement of the tattooed body. The sinuous twists and turns of the serpent become indistinguishable from the irezumi's folds of skin.



DARING Horikin practiced in his early years on his wife, experimenting with colors and techniques he would later perfect and become famous for. Her pale skin makes the colors particularly vibrant, and it is false modesty on his part to regard this early example of his work as "unsophisticated." Over the stomach, between the peony breasts and the peony navel, sits the all-powerful, all-protective Chinese lion, benevolent and kindly but a fierce defender, symbolic of courage and fortitude. Guardian Korean dogs adorn each hip and perhaps ensure fidelity or safety in childbirth. One macabre note: mounds of skulls rest atop the breasts. Overleaf: Detail of the peony navel and guardian Chinese lion.



ENDURANCE Peony nipples and navel attract the butterfly as the waves and rocks draw the carp. Above the solar plexus Horijin has tattooed the virtuous character ***shinobu***, meaning "endurance." This word has a subsidiary meaning also pertinent to the irezumi world, "to hide oneself" or "to live in concealment."



DEVOTION Appropriately, Horikin tattooed his wife's back with the Kwannon (Hindu ***Avalokitesvara***), the Buddhist goddess who is the All-Merciful One Surveying the World with Pity, and who rides a Golden Carp. Kwannon sits on a lotus throne with her head surrounded in a halo of purifying flames. Over her left buttock Horikin has tattooed his "chop" or signature mark.

For his own back, Horikin chose Fudo (Sanskrit ***Acala***), the Immobile One, meaning "Unmoved by Passion," one of the twelve Deva Kings or Buddhist divinities; this was tattooed by Horiyoshi III. Fudo the Destroyer is a central deity in esoteric Buddhism and the incarnation of the God of Wisdom, the Great Illuminator Dainichi, with the power "to foil the snares of devils." With his terrifying face he sits on a throne of flames, sword in his right hand to strike demons, and in his left hand, like a rosary, a lasso rope to bind them. Horikin has adopted Fudo as his patron saint.

Horikin's wife's hair is short because he is in the process of tattooing her head, which she shaves each time he begins work. Eventually they will both have identical patterns engraved on their scalps.

PRAYER The back of Horikin's wife shows the base of Kwannon's Lotus throne in Paradise surrounded by fierce guardian deities. Beneath it is Horikin's autograph in two red, lavishly stylized characters amid protective demons. Horikin was hesitant to have his wife's feet photographed because they were "unlovely and workworn."



RED CLOTH Horijin's favorite areas of the body for tattooing are the hips and buttocks, and this is an example of some of his best work. In this unique design he has transformed the area into a Shinto modesty apron of straw rope and paper tassels, which Sumo wrestlers wear in the ring at matches. Combining with this bow to the wrestler's strength is a bravo character from the ***Suikoden*** holding a cloth dyed red with blood. Wrestler, fantasy hero, and tattooed man become one.



THUNDERBOLT Horiichi has tattooed a series of near abstractions on this client, who asked for "the fury of the elements." Here are wind, thunder, lightning, and clouds tossed in turbulence.

TABOO These men have been tattooed by Horikin on the left, and Horigoro II on the right. The prayer *Nam Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo* (Hail to the Lotus Scripture of the Good Law) derives from the fanatical Nichiren sect of Buddhism founded in A.D. 1253, whose six million followers today are still much addicted to chanting and drumming. Their belief is that one perfect and sincere utterance of this single prayer will ensure rebirth in Nirvana, or Nothingness. The heavy leg tattooing on the man on the right was designed to cover severe scars. The Hail Lotus Sutra prayer is on the diagonal in red and upside down in gold to indicate either perversity or that Lord Buddha is omnidirectional. Both of these tattoos are particularly eccentric, in that they extend to the genitals. The penis is the last part of the anatomy to be tattooed and requires the most painful procedure of all. Two assistants hold the skin taut while the master tattoos in tiny sections. Many tattooees collapse after these sessions.

TRUST AND ORNAMENT (overleaf) Horikin, left, Horiuno, right; Horiuno, left, Horikin, right. The man on the far right has the Lotus prayer descending on his left leg and ascending upside down on his right leg. His body tattoo is the continuation of the famous battle between Heikuro and the Serpent seen earlier. The man on the left with the three-quarter body tattoo has a chivalrous commoner hero from Kabuki, with a stylish umbrella, tattooed on his back. One irezumi wears the additional ornament of a gold ring on his penis.





WATER Horikin delights in depicting earthly creatures and has varied traditional themes slightly. Young Kintaro here rides a slippery catfish, a red goldfish swims upstream to spawn, and the Lotus Prayer encircles the left thigh while a whiskered catfish forlornly cuts through the prayer.

Opposite: Close-up of Kintaro riding the catfish.



BLOSSOM Horiyoshi III turned for this full-back tattoo to Utamaro's ***ukiyo-e*** series of beautiful women of Yoshiwara's gay quarters, many of whom were themselves tattooed in the eighteenth century. The cherry blossom is one of the great symbols of Japan and popular in tattoo parlors. The blossom bursts upon the air in earliest spring, and within three days its petals fall. The brevity of its beauty links it inevitably to the warrior's short life and to the courtesan's brief span of youth and popularity. The courtesan depicted here has the flush of eroticism in the cherry color around her passionate eyes.





BENTEN WITH FAN Benten (Sanskrit *Sarasvati*) is the maiden deity of water and music and the only woman among the Seven Gods of Luck and Fortune. She represents the gentle arts of music, painting, literature, and soft speech. She is always pictured with a sea serpent and here is shown with her Chinese fan of yak leather. This masterpiece is signed Horiyoshi III (upper left-hand corner).

SIGNATURE Another version of Benten, deity of Good Fortune, the only female god still venerated in modern Japan. This time the tattoo is flamboyantly "chopped" by Horiyoshi III's official signature.



KABUKI PAIR New narratives were instantly formed as irezumi clustered together. Two separate tattoo scenes from Kabuki merge in this image. A seventeenth-century commoner hero forces open the mouth of a mythical crocodile beast (in reality a sorcerer) while his courtesan lover seemingly looks on in fright. (Note that the woman's obi is worn tied in front, jocularly said to be because she spent so much time on her back.)

VORTEX Horikin is perhaps the most skilled and knowledgeable tattoo master in Japan today, and this is one of his finest works. The design of this tattoo is intricate, and the colors uncommon, a combination of purples, white, and yellows, along with the more traditional black, green, red, and blue. His tattoo is extensive, covering all of his skin with the exception of his face and feet. Among the myriad images on his belly are a dragon, a Buddhist chant, and two reversed representations of a whirlwind.



TROPHY The grotesque side of irezumi as tattooed by Horiyoshi III. The subject's calves show a decapitated head and a desiccated skull. Around the thighs Buddhist prayers curl diagonally. Both the artist and the tattooed person here are members of the Horiyoshi clan, whose tattoos are frequently sadomasochistic. Many members of the Horiyoshi ***nakama*** have their nipples pierced with rings and chains, as an extension of the ornamentation on their bodies. Pierced nipples are common to groups associated with Western tattoos—bikers, for example—but the rings are delicate, almost camouflaged, in keeping with the subtler Japanese approach.

EDEN More grotesqueries. Young Japanese are requesting this sort of gruesome and violent tattoo, done here by Horiyoshi III. Again the cherry blossom, Japan's national flower, to emphasize the shortness and transience of life—and the snake of temptation. Perhaps this is a Christian- influenced version of the Garden of Eden story seen through Japanese eyes.

SEPPUKU (below) A dying man shown just after he has committed ***harakiri*** (literally, stomach cutting), more properly ***seppuku***.







CARP The subject here is Horiyoshi III himself, as tattooed by his master Horiyoshi II. The scene is a fantasy of ocean waves and wind, eddies and whirlpools, all celebrating the persistence and fortitude of the heroic carp. Note the pierced nipple.

Above: Horiyoshi III holding his as yet untattooed son.

NINJA RAT This subject was born in the Year of the Rat, the first one in the Oriental Zodiac. He chose the Ninja Rat for his back tattoo by Horikin. No one can explain why the rat, a rodent and a pest, should be honored in Japan's mythology. Nevertheless, the rat is associated with the God of Wealth, one of the Seven Deities of Luck, and is depicted in iconography ferreting around the rich man's bales of rice. The rat is also connected with fecundity, as can be seen from this humorous tattoo, here and overleaf, with its chorus of rat children sniveling around the parent Super Rat. The rat also symbolizes the ancient Japanese art of subterfuge, or ***ninjutsu***, where the ninja, secret agents



invisible as rats in order to enter a castle stronghold to steal, murder, or merely reconnoiter. Ninja were stealthy, appeared in the darkness of night (for invisibility), and mystically they were assumed to be able to take other shapes, notably the rat itself (as in the Kabuki play ***Nikki Danjo***) or the "raccoon dog" famous for its ability to scale trees in an instant.



The two group portraits show some of my favorite and most loyal models, and include the front and back of Mitsuaki Ohwada—Horikin. Here the men assumed more formal and traditional irezumi poses for the camera.

KINTARO AND MAPLE LEAVES
Kintaro again in mortal struggle with the powerful carp. This time he is older, armed, fully clothed, and tied with a bow at the obi (in lieu of the ***haramaki***). The maple leaves suggest the passage of time or aging. Horiichi's signature chop, or ***han***, is at the top left of the full-back tattoo.



PERSEVERANCE Horijin tells here the famous Chinese story of the lioness mother who tossed her favorite, still suckling cub down a ravine to train and encourage him to climb back to her. It is a legend of the survival of the fittest and symbolic of the Confucian ideal of parents sacrificing feeling so that their offspring may strengthen.

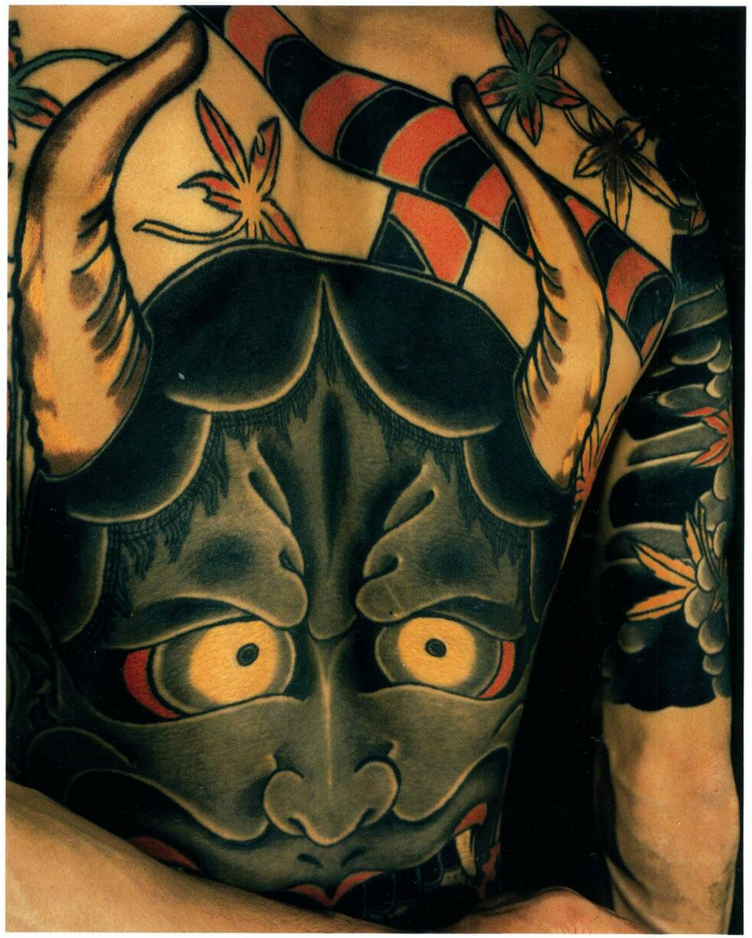
PEONY AND SWORD AND SERPENT'S TAIL (overleaf) Horiyoshi III combines opposites in the contrasting tattoos of the sword and the peony, indicative of strength and beauty in control of the horned demons of this world, and the serpent and the rope, so similar yet so unalike.



STRENGTH In this tattoo by Horijin, Kurikara Kengoro, one of the heroic outlaws from the ***Suikoden*** tales, has set out to oppose evil and correct wickedness. This time he is protected by the Buddhist deity Fudo. The rectangular cartouche (upper left) names the band to which the Men of the Marshes belong.



JEALOUSY An original, Western-influenced rendition by Horiyoshi III of the Japanese traditional concept of the two-horned devil (***oni***) of jealousy. According to Japanese folklore, jealous women grow similar horns. In the wedding ceremony, they are hidden by the bride's white headdress. Many young Japanese today prefer images of generic toughness like these to traditional patterns.



PHOENIX Horiyoshi III selected for his wife's back the legendary phoenix, the eternal bird of mythology who rises reborn out of the ashes of destruction again and again. The couple first met at a festival where Horiyoshi was displaying his tattoos, and his wife admits to having had an instant attraction.

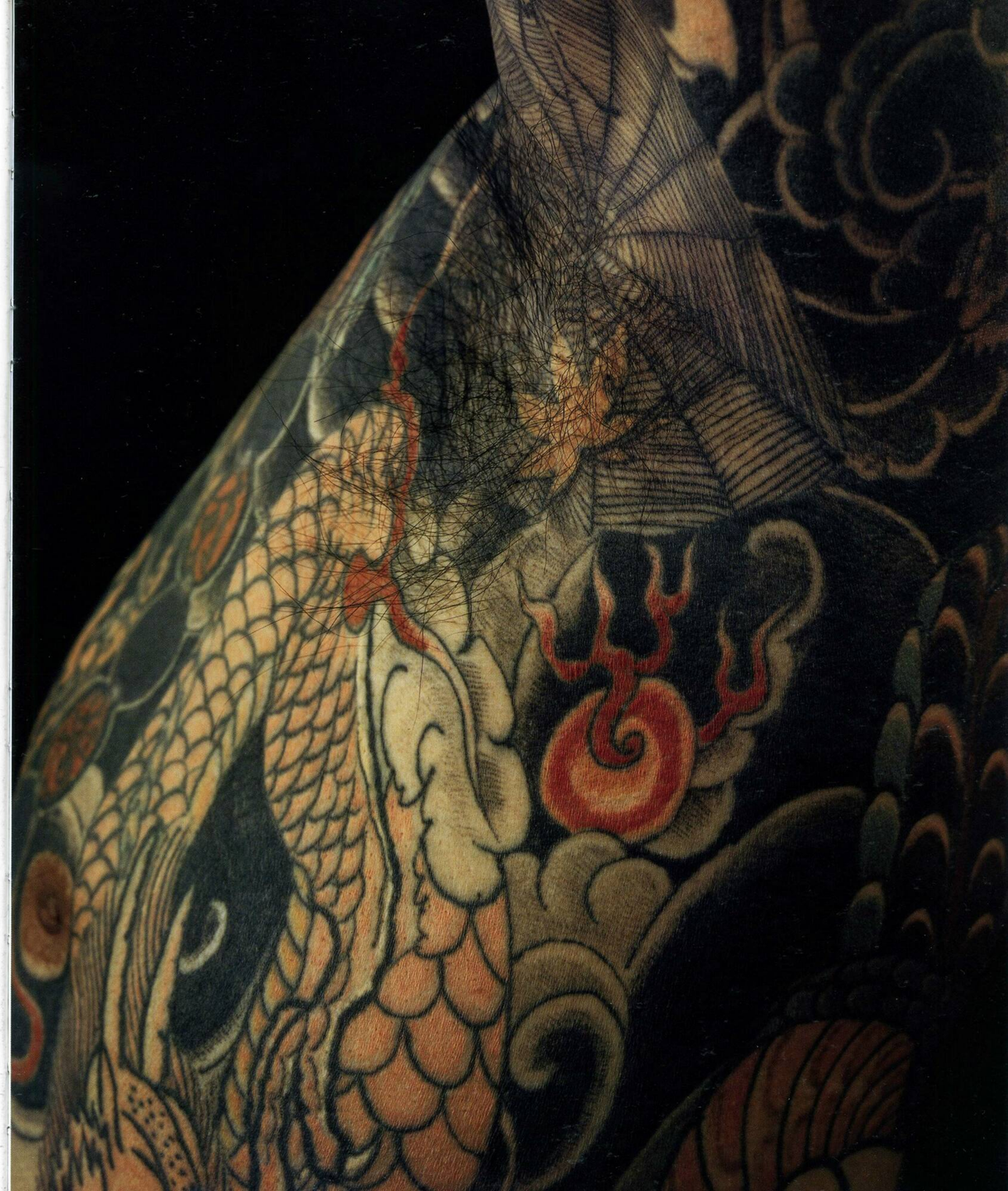


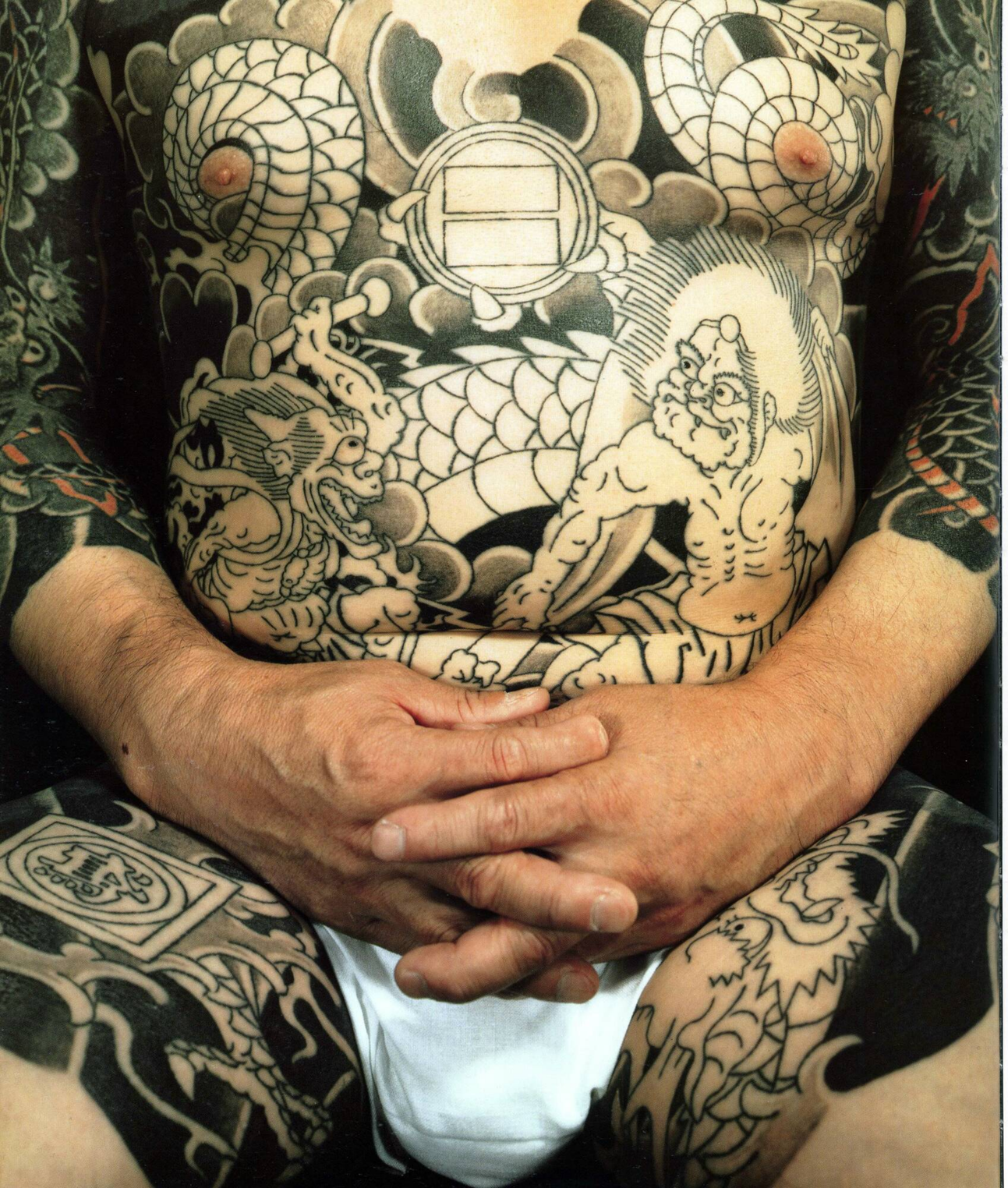


BRAVERY Here Horiyoshi III depicts another tattooed hero from the ***Suikoden***, the famous Chinese novel about the exploits of a band of 108 brave warriors.

SPIDERWEB The client requested "a delicate and detailed image" for his underarm, one of the most painful areas to be tattooed and also one of the most dangerous. The needle pricks are constantly subjected to excretions from the sweat glands. The underarm hair suggested to Horikin the idea of a furry spider's web. The spider in Japan has dual meaning: if seen in the daytime, good luck; at night, misfortune.

Spiderweb is also the nickname of a famous American tattoo artist. There seems to be a universal respect for the complex delicacy of this natural phenomenon. The inherent contradiction of the spider, which creates beauty to capture and kill, reflects some of the preoccupations of the irezumi.





WIND AND LIGHTNING In this unusual monochrome tattoo by Horiichi III, the circular medallion at the solar plexus between the dragon-tail nipples is probably the code logo of a Yakuza group of buddies, or ***nakama.*** It is a stylization of a rice cooker, and its hidden meaning is that "he who eats from the same pot is a brother." Right, mid-chest, Fujin, God of the Winds and another of the twelve Deva Kings of Buddhism, is always depicted as a clawed demon. Here he is engaged in combat with a comical, laughing dragon of rain. On the subject's right thigh is the secret name of the group within the group, a wild bird.

DEATH AND BEAUTY A beauteous courtesan is haunted by the specter of old age, death, and disease.

GRACE (right) A tattoo terminated at this point. Like Kabuki, where every onstage moment if arrested would make a perfect picture, so, too, the tattoo even at its beginning should stand as beautiful although incomplete. The subject here is a jazz musician with, of course, no connection to the Yakuza.



TRANSCENDENCE Horikin designed this pattern for his head ("the seat of all senses"), which was then tattooed variously by Horigoro III, Horikin II (his brother and disciple), and Horiyoshi III. Here the art of tattooing joins that of calligraphy. The large red characters are a form of modified Sanskrit for Acala. The small characters repeat, like a chant, the god's name one hundred times. The image has many levels of meaning and resembles a seated Lord Buddha with smoke rising from his holiness. This is the second tattooed head in Japanese history. The first belonged to Horikame, who died in 1932. Now that Horikin's hair has begun to thin and his forehead shows his tattoos, he wears a hat in public.



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A NOTE ABOUT THE CAMERA

The camera with which these pictures were taken is one of only five in the world. It was generously made available for my use in Japan by Polaroid Corporation. Five feet high and three-and-a-half feet wide, it weighs two hundred pounds. Using standard Polacolor ER film in rolls, the camera provides an image twenty by twenty-four inches. As with other Polaroid cameras, the film is processed in the back of the camera, with a normal developing time of sixty to seventy seconds. Most of the pictures in this book were taken with a 600mm lens and forty-eight inches of bellows extension, resulting in life-size images in full color.



LIST OF PLATES

Restraint 21
Kintaro 22
Red Kintaro 25
Lion Dog 27
Modesty 28
Seven Gods of Good Fortune 31
Center and Wisdom 32
Flirtation 34
Fire and Water 36, 37
Felicity 38
Heikuro and Serpent 41
Daring 42
Endurance 46
Devotion 48
Prayer 51
Red Cloth 53
Thunderbolt 54
Taboo 57
Trust and Ornament 58, 59
Water 60
Blossom 63
Benten with Fan 64
Signature 67
Kabuki Pair 68
Vortex 71
Benten 15
Trophy 72, 73
Seppuku 74
Eden 75
Carp 76
Ninja Rat 79
Kabuki Playboy 83
Gray Dragon 84
Irezumi Groups 86, 87
Kintaro and Maple Leaves 89
Perseverance 90
Peony and Sword and Serpent's Tail
Strength 95
Jealousy 96
Phoenix 99
Bravery 100
Spiderweb 103
Wind and Lightning 104
Death and Beauty 106
Grace 107
Transcendence 109